

# The Failure of the Super Committee and the Dismal Future for Congress

Posted: 11/30/11 02:14 PM ET

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The failure of the super committee to agree to a compromise that would lead to reigning in the national debt and spearhead a more balanced budget could only have come as a surprise to somebody who has spent the last decade or so living under a rock. The notion that a smaller bipartisan microcosm of congress could resolve these problems and reach an effective compromise was always something of a fantasy. The super committee quickly devolved into a mixture of partisan grandstanding and posturing, predictable and tiresome ultimatums about taxes, muscle flexing by powerful lobbies and a complete absence of political courage. In short, it looked quite a bit like congress has over the past few years.

The super committee was little more than a gimmick, something about which bloggers, pundits and insiders could speculate and chat. The economic and fiscal problems, however, facing the country are not the kind which can be solved by gimmicks. The failure of the super committee, once all the speculation and chatter is cleared away, is due, once again because of the deadlock between Democrats, who would like to approach the deficit problem through a combination of spending cuts and tax increases, and Republicans who refuse to even entertain the possibility of more taxes even on the richest Americans.

The dynamic of the Democrats being willing to mix tax increases and spending cuts and the Republicans being unwilling to consider any tax increases while simultaneously presenting the problem as being about the inflexibility of the Democrats has come to define the entire discussion of the debt. This dynamic can continue as long as government is divided and the Democrats continue to have little choice but to act as a foil for Republican extremism and rigidity. However, if a Republican president gets elected, the hard-liners in congress will no longer have this kind of foil. The Republican president will either have to stand up to his own party and take a more rational approach to the deficit, risking, of course, political ire, from his own base, or continue to cling to a radical anti-tax agenda, thus precluding any real progress on the deficit.

The Republican fetishization of tax cuts is not new, but it has hardened into a position that not only makes solving any economic or fiscal problems impossible, but also makes it extremely difficult to even arrive at compromises which are, by almost any measure, victories for the right wing. Creating a super committee following the absurd negotiations over the debt ceiling, which also were driven by the Republican unwillingness to entertain the possibility of new taxes, was not going to change this deeply held position which has come to define the Republican Party in the 21st century. The question of why

anybody thought the super committee would produce another outcome or not falter on this issue is one to which there is no easy answer other than that it was a demonstration of the absence of leadership and the unwillingness to take on the real problems that dominate Washington.

The super committee, in addition to being a gimmick, was a way for congressional leadership and the White House to put off the decisions that were forced upon them by the debt ceiling debate. On balance, it was probably wise for both sides to agree to the super committee if that was what it took to increase the debt ceiling last summer. However, kicking the difficult work of congress down the road is not a sustainable governing strategy.

One of the central principles of governing, as well as decision making in general, is to make decisions when there are still decent options. Putting off difficult decisions, as the leaders of both parties almost certainly are aware, means that in most cases the decisions are made for you, or made by other actors. This is part of the dilemma congress now confronts. It is still possible to put off any significant action on the deficit, which is what congress is likely to do, but all this will accomplish is narrowing of the options and limiting the government's ability to make any decisions.

In general, the failure of the super committee is, fittingly, essentially a microcosm of the failure of congress and indeed our political system, but it means that congress faces a decision point that is increasingly serious. Either it can continue to be a body characterized primarily by assertion of partisan absolutes or the members of congress can seek to govern. The latter option is more radical and less likely because there is almost no evidence from recent years that congress is willing, or even able, to do this. The failure of the super committee only further confirms this.